

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE, December 8, 1999
Wednesday
CONTACT: Diane Pratt (202) 225-5235

**"Government Should Be Held Accountable--
for the Sake of America's Schoolchildren"**

By Rep. Allen Boyd

At an early age, children begin to learn that every action has consequences--some positive and some negative. As parents, we strive to teach our children that they must take responsibility for their actions and the consequences they bring. And certainly, we all believe our government should be held to the same standard of accountability we demand of our children.

As a Member of Congress, one of my goals is to require the government to take more responsibility for its actions. Before amending current policies, government officials should carefully consider the impact these changes will have on our communities. If these reforms cause harm to American citizens and our country, we should look to a different approach.

In my effort to make government more accountable, I introduced H.R. 2389, the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act. I am proud to say that in November, the House passed this legislation, taking a big step toward alleviating the painful burden recent changes in forest management policies have had on America's rural school children.

In 1907, Congress established the National Forest System, returning thousands of acres of land to federal ownership. While this action has thankfully preserved some of America's most precious resources, it did not come without a cost. In turning these properties into federal reserves, Congress removed the counties' ability to collect local property taxes and benefit from commerce on these lands--revenue which primarily fund school systems.

To correct this problem, in 1908, Congress passed a law which turned over 25 percent of the revenues collected from National Forests to the counties in which these lands reside. Since that time, forested counties, with a very limited tax base, have come to depend upon these 25 percent payments to cover teachers' salaries, school repair costs, curriculum expenses and other educational needs.

However, in recent years, the federal government has dramatically changed its policies on timber harvesting in National Forests, from which the majority of the 25 percent payments are raised. While these reforms have helped preserve finite resources and wildlife, they have also had a crippling effect on forested county school systems.

This problem has hit home in Florida's Second Congressional District where Liberty, Wakulla, Franklin, Leon and Columbia Counties all receive payments from revenue raised in the Apalachicola and Osceola National Forests. Between 1987 and 1993, payments to Apalachicola Forest counties have decreased by 89 percent--from \$1,905,000 to a paltry \$220,000.

As a result, our rural forested counties in Florida and across the nation have been forced to lay off teachers, increase class sizes, postpone necessary renovation projects and eliminate

academic enrichment programs. By ignoring the negative impact of these policy changes, the government is shortchanging its most precious resource--our children.

Fortunately, the House of Representatives passed legislation which will correct this injustice so government can keep its promise to America's schoolchildren. By passing my bill, H.R. 2389, Congress will ensure a predictable payment level to federal forest communities for a seven year period. The payment level would be based on an average of the three highest payments received by a state between fiscal years 1984 and the year of the bill's enactment. Under this bill, annual payments to Florida will increase by 1,842,146, bringing \$712,657 more to the Second Congressional District, as compared to 1999 figures. In addition, the bill establishes a Forest Counties Payment Committee, made up of government, local community and school officials, to develop a long term solution to the problem.

While the Senate has not yet held a vote on this legislation, I am hopeful that my colleagues in the other chamber will recognize the needs of our school children and take swift action to pass the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act. Our government must be held accountable for the consequences of its policy decisions. We must serve as a role model for our nation's children and show them that government truly represents the American people.